THE BRONZE SERPENT AND THE CROSS OF THE LORD

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Translated from the original Greek:
Γεώργιος Μαυρομάτης,
Τό χάλκινο φίδι καί ό Σταυρός τού Κυρίου,
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I

It is well known that the Old Testament is understood when the light of the New Testament shines upon it. This is particularly applicable in the realm of our Orthodox Church, which interprets the Old Testament in its teaching, hymns, and iconography through the light of the New Testament.

Thus, the Old Testament refers to the event of the Crucifixion of the Lord, which we experience intensely during Holy Week, in the form of types and antitypes or even clearer references to it. However, they are understood in relation to and interpreted by the New Testament.

Specifically, when we read the story of the bronze serpent, which Moses lifted up in the desert for the salvation of the Israelites from the bites of snakes, it would indeed be a nice story, but it would leave many

questions unanswered within us.

However, from the moment our Lord Himself gives the content and meaning of that story and act, this story ceases to be a simple story.

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So what happened with the Lord? At the beginning of the third chapter of the Gospel of John, there is a dialogue between our Lord and Nicodemus, in which, among other significant and important things that the Lord says in response to Nicodemus' related questions, He interprets and gives the meaning of the story of the bronze serpent. And it is preferable to start from this word of the Lord and afterwards - seemingly anachronistically - to study and analyse those of the Old Testament.

The Lord said:

"And even as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, thus it is needful for the Son of Man to be lifted up, that everyone who believeth in Him should not perish but may have everlasting life" (John 3:14-15).

Just as Moses lifted up the bronze serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him may not perish but have eternal life.

Immediately, the lifting up of the bronze serpent in the wilderness takes on meaning. The bronze serpent

becomes a symbol of salvation. St. Nikodemos the Hagiorite, whose teaching is a synthesis of the teaching of the Holy Fathers, notes that “that bronze serpent was a type of the crucified Christ, according to Cyril of Alexandria, the holy Theodoret, Gregory of Nyssa, and Severian... because just as the bronze serpent indeed had the form of a serpent, it did not have the poison of the serpent, so also the Lord indeed had a human body, but He did not have human sin. That is why Paul said: ‘God sent His Son into the world, who to conquer sin, took flesh like ours, the sinful, without being sinful’ (Romans 8:3), and Isaiah said: ‘He committed no sin’ (Isaiah 53:9).”[1]

There is also another observation from the Patriarch of Constantinople, John Kalekas. Christ, he notes, willingly walks toward the Crucifixion: “The Lord and Saviour, before His Crucifixion, indicated that He already knows about it beforehand. And therefore, He comes willingly to the Passion for the salvation of mankind. And the Lord does not say openly and clearly that He will be crucified. Still, He reminds us of the ancient story of the serpent, simultaneously teaching us that the old and the new are related and that the Lawgiver of both the Old and the New Testament is One and the Same. He also teaches that even though the Jews, looking at the bronze representation of the serpent, avoided physical and temporary death, much more so we, seeing the crucified Lord of glory and believing in Him, shall avoid the eternal death of the soul.”[2]

The same Patriarch of Constantinople also makes

another remark on the subject of the exaltation of the Son of Man, our Lord. He says: “Hearing ‘to be exalted,’ we must understand that He was hung up high, to sanctify also the air, He who sanctified the earth by walking upon it. It must also be understood with ‘to be exalted’ that He was glorified because the Cross truly became the height and glory of Christ. And while it seemed that the Lord was condemned, in this - the Cross - He condemned the ruler of this world.”[3]

St. Nikodemos the Hagiorite, referring to St. Gregory the Theologian, on the strangeness of this type, says the following: “Gregory the Theologian understood a deep and strange meaning. Because he wants to say that the bronze serpent was not a type of Christ who was crucified, but an antitype, that is, a type opposed to Christ. As if to say it was a type of the spiritual serpent, the devil. And to those who wonder how the serpent saved and healed those who looked at it if it was an antitype of Christ and a type of the devil, I say, the Theologian answers that the serpent healed those who looked towards it. But whom? Those, that is, who believe that the devil, represented by the serpent, lives no longer, but has been put to death by Christ who was crucified and also killed the demons who are subjected to Him.”[4]

The words of Saint Gregory the Theologian are as follows: “The bronze serpent certainly hangs against the snakes that bite, but as an opposite image (antitype), and not as an image of Him who suffered for our sake, because the serpent saves those who see it, not because they believe it to be alive, but because it is dead, and

with it, it puts to death the powers that lie under its authority since it has been abolished itself, as it deserved."[5]

In these meanings, St. John Chrysostom remains – to stay a little longer with the words of the Lord, emphasising: "Do you see what is the cause of the Cross and the salvation that comes from it? Do you see the connection between the image of the serpent and the truth? They, the Jews, avoided death, but only temporary death. Here, the faithful avoid eternal death. There, the hung serpent healed the bites of the snakes. Here, Christ, who was crucified, healed the wounds of the spiritual dragon. There, he, who looked with physical eyes, was healed. Here, he who sees with the eyes of the soul casts off all sins. There, the hung bronze was shaped like a serpent; here, the Body of the Lord is made by the Holy Spirit. There, a snake bit, and a snake healed. Thus, here, death destroyed and death saved. But the snake that killed had poison, while the one that saved was free from poison. And here, the same happened again. That is, the death that annihilated had sin, just as the snake had poison; however, the death of the Lord was free from all sin, just as the bronze serpent was free from poison."[6]

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Some elements should still be pointed out in the Lord's above words before analysing the story of the bronze serpent.

1) The Lord emphasises that "it is necessary to be

lifted up" on the Cross. St. John Chrysostom says, "He did not say it is necessary to be hung but to be lifted up. For he used that expression which seemed more honourable for the listener and because it was closer to the image of the bronze serpent."[7]

From a different perspective, however, the lifting on the Cross of Christ is the first and primary step for the ascent to the throne. The Lord was lifted up as a man with His crucifixion. He was lifted up on the Cross as a spectacle, as a sign. He was lifted up between heaven and earth as if He were not worthy of either and as if He were abandoned by both. He was lifted up also at His ascension to sit at the right hand of the Father and to grant repentance and forgiveness of sins.[8]

A crucial observation by St. John Chrysostom on our topic: "Because it was thought that the Passion is humiliation, the Saviour calls it exaltation. For the whole world was lifted up with the Cross, the whole world that lay low was raised up by the salvation of the Cross."[9] Regarding this exaltation, the monk Euthymius Zigabenus notes: "Due to this resemblance, the Lord says, 'As Moses lifted up the serpent,' and so on. He then explains the purpose of this elevation. As Moses lifted up the serpent to preserve the lives of those who looked at it, so Jesus Christ was lifted up so that those who look upon Him–that is, believe in Him–may have eternal life."[10]

2) The Lord is referred to as the "Son of Man" and not as the "Son of God" intentionally to emphasise the idea of representation and substitution. The common

nature with us explains how the Son of Man suffered as our representative.[11] And, as Euthymius Zigabenus would clarify:

"There, it was a serpent because serpents were biting, and here, it is a human because humanity was bitten. Just as harm came through serpents, so healing came through a serpent. And here, since death entered the world through man, so through man came life–and through a man who died, to put an end to what causes death."[12]

3) The Lord's saying emphasises "everyone who believes" to clarify that the offered salvation is universal, so anyone who believes, without any exception, benefits from this salvation.[13] With the Lord's word, which says that whoever believes will have eternal life, Euthymius Zigabenus states that "it is revealed that He who, through His death, provides eternal life to others, is certainly God. And He who does not allow others to perish can never perish Himself. The Cross, therefore, is a source of eternal life, a fact that reason does not easily accept, yet faith accepts it, strengthening reason. Therefore, there is a need for faith."[14]

4) Finally, the Lord's phrase "but has eternal life" is characteristic. To have eternal life means more than to live eternally because the emphasis of the phrase is not on duration but on the quality of life. "To have eternal life" means participation in the life of God (John 5:26) and of Christ (John 1:4), which is a life that transcends (surpasses) the influences and conditions of time.[15]

II

However, let us now turn to the story of the bronze serpent, as described in the Book of Numbers in the Old Testament (21:4-9).

The Israelites find themselves in the desert, always oriented towards the land of promise. During the day, clouds shade them, and the same cloud lights them at night. God continuously feeds them with manna and ensures that they find water, either naturally or miraculously.

Not long before, Aaron died, and they mourned him together for a full thirty days. If the mourning was heavy for the people, it was even heavier for Moses. After the death of his sister Miriam, who had saved him in a basket in the waters of the Nile, his supporter Aaron also departed. And while these things were happening,

a new adventure presented itself to the Israelites. Suddenly and without any provocation, the Canaanite king Arad attacked them. He defeated them and captured several prisoners. Pleading with God, they defeated Arad and continued on their journey. However, the Edomites, who were on their way, did not allow them to pass through their land, and thus, they were forced to make a long detour to avoid the Edomites. They advanced from Mount Hor toward the front. It seems that this road was bad, and they suffered and toiled following it and became discouraged:

And they departed from Mount Hor by the way of the Red Sea to go around the land of Edom, and the people became discouraged on the way.

And the people spoke against God and against Moses, saying: "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no bread nor water, and our soul loathes this worthless bread."

They departed from Mount Hor and took the road to the Red Sea to go around the land of Edom. However, the people grew discouraged along the way.

And the people became discontented against God and against Moses and said: "Why has this happened? You brought us out of Egypt to kill us in the wilderness? For there is no bread or water here, and we detest this miserable food."[16]

The Israelites appear ungrateful and forgetful of God's continuous blessings since the day of their departure from Egypt. They are also forgetful of the hardships they suffered in Egypt. St. Cyril of Alexandria notes the following about this:

"They worked in Egypt, and while they suffered under unbearable slavery, they were freed by God through many marvellous miracles that occurred there. The water was turned into blood, and frogs and gnats, as well as flies and the downpour of hail, nearly destroyed the land of the Egyptians. They were further punished with darkness, and the death of the firstborn devastated those who preferred greed, but God saved the Israelites in a marvellous way. Then, passing through the sea as if it were dry land, they saw the Egyptians perish in a lamentable manner. They received bread from heaven because God sent them manna, and they followed Him, as Christ appeared to them as a rock, and, without them expecting it, when they were thirsty, He sent them spring water out of compassion. For God is omnipotent and abundantly provides the necessities for their lives to those who are devoted to Him. However, those who enjoyed such extraordinary goods were revealed to be who they truly were with little effort."

"And indeed, they forgot what God sent them, were very unstable in their faith towards Him, easily shaken and prone to faint-heartedness, and they were remarkably ignorant of all those things with which they had been honoured. For the people called the bread from heaven "worthless" and complained about the lack of water, even though they had learned that nothing was impossible for the divine and ineffable Being, who even made the steep rock a source of water that flowed like a river."[17]

The Israelites may have come out of Egypt and

found themselves far from it, yet Egypt did not come out of them. They carried it with them. And they grumbled as if they had left paradise. They forgot the slavery and hard labour and lied about the bread and the water, saying they were lacking. God always took care of them, and no one died from lack for forty years.

And they speak blasphemous words. The manna, "the heavenly bread" (Ex. 16:3, Ps. 78:24), the "bread of the Angels" (Ps. 78:25) they call "insipid bread," meaning light, tasteless, and not filling.

Apollinarius of Laodicea says, "Their way is carnal, which leads to the desire of the flesh and blames the best food,"[18] and he continues: "This makes the punishment more severe, for it is good for the one being educated to understand that the cause lies within himself and not to blame God from whom good originates and not evil."[19] However, this often happens with people. They prefer to stay close to the pots of meat and in darkness and death, that is, far from God, rather than to be in the wilderness near God and eat the heavenly bread.

For the Israelites, this is the first time that God, in response to the general murmuring and ingratitude, does not reply with kindness but with punishment as they deserved:

And the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, and many of the sons of Israel died.

Then the Lord sent poisonous snakes to the

people, which bit them, and so many Israelites died.

The Hebrew text speaks of "fiery serpents," which may refer to a "burning" sensation left by the bite of such a reptile.

So, God sent them poisonous or fiery serpents as a punishment. What happened, that is, so that we can see the event more spiritually? There were and are many such serpents in that desert even today. However, God, in His providence, took care to remove them so they would not be in the way of the Israelites. However, when the Israelites proved ungrateful to divine providence, God withdrew His protective hand from them. Or, to put it more correctly, by their own will, they fled from the grace and protection of God. And what was natural followed. The serpents returned to where they were before and even more numerous and bit the people. And many died from these bites.[20]

This sorrow and fear of death led the people to repentance:

So the people came to Moses and said to him: "We have sinned, for we complained against the Lord and against you; make intercession to the Lord to remove the snakes from us." Thus, Moses prayed to the Lord for the people.

For the first time, the Israelites repented so quickly. But how can they present themselves to God as repentant and seek His mercy? They had accused Him, as well as Moses. Nevertheless, Moses seemed closer to

them as a man, and they confessed their sin. And something more. They ask him to pray for them to God. And they now consider the one they accused before as the most worthy and most suitable to beseech God to have mercy on them. To drive away the poisonous snakes from their camp.

And the patient Prophet of the patient God "prayed to the Lord for the people." Always ready, always willing to plead with God for the salvation of the ungrateful Israelites. And Moses' intercession brought divine help after the people's repentance in such a way that God's help depended on the faith of the Israelites. With much wisdom, God does not drive away the snakes. He allows them to bite and kill the Israelites. However, at the same time, He provides a marvellous means by which those bitten by the snakes will be healed, but they will also learn their saving lesson. It happened as follows:

And the Lord said to Moses, "Make a serpent for yourself and set it on a pole, and it shall be that if a serpent bites anyone when he looks at it, he shall live."

Then the Lord told Moses: "Make a snake and hang it on a pole; every time a snake bites someone, the bitten one shall look at the snake (on the pole) and live."

A question arises from the content of this verse. Mainly because the snake is a cursed animal and because everyone hanging on a tree is cursed. Severian of Gabala resolves the question: "If you consider it worthy of wonder that a blessing can spring from the cursed, because: 'Everyone who hangs on a tree is

cursed' (Deut. 21:23), and how the image of the cursed serpent, which heard: 'You are the most cursed of all animals' (Gen. 3:14), brought salvation to the people who were in distress. Therefore would it not be more credible to say: 'If anyone among you is bitten, let him look up to heaven, to God, and he will be saved?' But to omit turning to heaven, could he not say: If anyone is bitten, let him look to the lamp of light and be saved? Or let him look to the table of the offering of the holy bread, and he will be saved? Or to the altar, or the veil, or the ark, or the mercy seat? None of these did the great lawgiver - Moses - present, but he alone erected the image of the Cross, and this through the cursed serpent."[21]

There is, of course, a query. Why did God not drive away the snakes but commanded the construction of a bronze serpent? St. John Chrysostom answers: "The Israelites plead with Moses. Moses pleads with God. God gives a remedy for the wounds, even though He could have when Moses pleaded with Him to drive the snakes away. However, God leaves the plague and gives the remedy: Make a bronze serpent and set it on a pole in front of the door of the tent of meeting and proclaim to the Israelites: 'If a snake bites someone, they should come and look at the snake set on a pole, believing they will live.' Therefore, was it not possible for the snakes to be driven away? Was it not possible for them to be killed? Could God not heal the wound with just one word? However, just as a word from God could bring water from the rock but did not do so until the rock saw the symbol of the Cross, here, too, He could have driven away the snakes, but until the snakes saw the image of

the Cross that nullifies the bites of demons, they did not gather themselves together."[22]

And Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole, and it came to pass that when a serpent bit someone, they looked at the bronze serpent and lived.

Moses received the command and fulfilled it. He made a bronze serpent, similar to those that bit the Israelites, and lifted it up on a 'sign.' The corresponding Hebrew word (נֵס - 'nes') means 'banner' or 'standard' [i.e., that is lifted up as a signal or rallying point]. He, therefore, raised it on a high pole and in a place so that it could be seen from all parts of the camp. And whoever among the Israelites was bitten by a living snake would be healed immediately if they lifted their eyes and gazed at the bronze serpent.

However, this whole incident raises some questions:

1) How could a bronze serpent save? It seems like something magical and perhaps it would be close to the concept of an idol.

No! It was not the bronze snake that saved the Israelites. It was God who healed them when, by gazing upon it, they showed faith in God. The Wisdom of Solomon states clearly: "For when the fierce anger of the beasts came upon them, and the bites of the coiled snakes were destroying them, Your anger did not last until the end; but for a little while they were disturbed, having a counsellor for salvation in the remembrance of

Your law's commandment— for he who turned to it was saved not by what he saw, but by You, the Savior of all" (Wisdom of Solomon 16:5-7).

A more spiritual interpretation of the healing method through the bronze snake is given by St. Makarios the Egyptian, emphasising how the gaze upon the likeness gradually led to God. He says verbatim: "When they fixed their attention upon the bronze serpent, obtained healing. This was done by way of dispensation in order that those who were held by earthly cares and the worship of idols and the pleasures of Satan and all manner of ungodliness might by this means to some extent, look upward to the things above and, gaining a respite from things below, might give heed to higher things and again proceed from the lower to that which is highest. Thus advancing little by little to the higher and loftier things, we might come to know that there is One Most High surpassing all the creation."[23]

2) How is it that God, who was so strict against the making of idols and set as the first commandment of the Mosaic law "you shall not make for yourself an idol" (Ex. 20:4), now gives the command to Moses to "make for yourself a serpent" (Ex. 21:8)?

The bronze serpent lifted in the wilderness was not an idol. It was a prophetic type (or antitype, as we have seen in the previous sections) that Christ later explained. It led to faith in God and prefigured the Crucified Lord.

The history of the Old Testament speaks of its place in the life of the Israelites. It was preserved as a sacred relic that reminded them of God's benevolence. And it was preserved for as long as it was truly believed to be a relic of memory.. However, when the Israelites deified it and paid it honours and worship when the pious king Hezekiah ascended to the throne, he destroyed the bronze serpent despite its sanctity. In this way, its worship was abolished along with any pretext for idolatry (4 Kings 18:4). Thus, it is explained why the Apostle Paul does not mention it among the sacred objects in the Epistle to the Hebrews (9:1-10).[24]

Severian of Gabala justifies the construction of the bronze serpent as follows: “Most faithful servant of God -Moses-, do you do what you forbid? Do you create what you destroy? You who say, you shall not make a graven image, nor a molten image (Leviticus 26:1), do you yourself make a molten and graven serpent? ‘Those things,’ Moses says, ‘I legislated to cut off the matter of impiety and to remove the people from every form of idolatry. Now, however, I make the molten serpent to prefigure the image of salvation through the Cross. I smooth the way beforehand for the Apostles, preparing in advance that great strange symbol of the Cross.’”[25]

After constructing Moses's supposed response, Severian continues explaining in more detail how the bronze serpent was a type of Christ's crucifixion.

He says verbatim: “The type was an image of salvation through the Cross. And according to the type, the -bronze- serpent had the image and appearance of a

serpent, but it did not have the poison and cunning of a serpent. So also the Saviour, according to the divine Apostle, was revealed in the likeness of sinful flesh, yet was free from all sin (Romans 8:3)... Different are the serpents that bite, and different is He who is crucified because of them. What does this mystery conceal in its shadow? As there, the snakes that bite are different, and the one that does not bite and does not strike is nailed to the wood; similarly, the sinless Jesus suffers and endures for all others who fall into sin. For the snakes that bite, a harmless and innocent snake is crucified. For us who are subject to death, He who is not subject to sin is nailed to the Cross."

Severian of Gabala continues analysing the topic: "Why is a bronze snake crucified? To abolish the bites of the snakes. So, the snake that is crucified is different from the snakes that are abolished. Do you not see the expression of the truth? A snake was crucified to abolish the bites of the dragons. Christ was crucified to abolish the actions of the demons. The snake that is nailed is different, and the dragons that are abolished are different. Christ is on the Cross, and the demons are being abolished. And just as there the image of the one who appeared as a snake abolished the bites of the snakes, so here the death of Christ became the death of death and the overthrow of the demons."[26]

3) Was the sign of the Cross really formed with the spear (vertical) and the bronze snake (horizontal) so that the symbolism would come closer to the crucifixion of the Lord? St. Nikodemos the Hagiorite says that "the Holy Scripture does not clearly state that Moses placed

the snake sideways on that upright wood which he calls a ‘sign,’ but this is inferred...However, all the interpreters say that with that ‘sign,’ and the serpent, the Cross was typified.”[27]

Thus, St. Justin says: “By inspiration and influence that comes from God, Moses took bronze, made a type of the cross, set it up on the holy tent, and said to the people: If you look at this type and believe, you will be saved through it.”[28]

And St. Athanasios the Great notes: “Moses made the type of the Cross, and for this the Saviour testifies, saying: ‘Just as Moses lifted up the bronze serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up.’”[29]

Also, St. Basil the Great writes: “We know that the Cross is called a sign in the Holy Scriptures. For it says: Moses set the serpent upon a sign, that is, upon the Cross.”[30]

However, the holy Fathers' testimonies on this subject are many, and others will not be mentioned.

III

The interpreting Fathers of our Church did not only interpret the story of the bronze serpent; they brought it before us so that it might become an experience, a life, an example, and an exhortation for us.

As a beginning and epigraph, we could mention the Word of Saint Ignatius the God-bearer, who says: "The Word, when His body was lifted up, like the bronze serpent in the desert, drew us all to Himself, so that we might be saved eternally."[31]

St. Makarios the Egyptian speaks experientially about the events of the Old Testament and observes how the serpents are not external to us but within us, and we identify with them. A great struggle is necessary, he says, for these snakes to become inactive, but also great faith. This terrifying and significant saying of Saint Makarios is as follows:

"In truth, we have not yet acquired simplicity of conduct or the enlightenment of the nous. We have not yet been found worthy to receive *the guileless and spiritual milk* (1 Pet. 2:2) and the noetic growth. The day has not yet dawned upon us, nor *the day star risen in our hearts* (2 Pet. 1:19). We have not yet been mingled with the *Sun of Righteousness* (Mal. 4:2), nor begun to flash with His rays. We have not yet received the

likeness of the Lord nor been made *partakers of the divine nature* (2 Pet. 1:4). We have not yet become the genuine purple of the King nor the unfalsified image of God. We are not yet smitten with the eros of God or wounded by the spiritual love of the Bridegroom. We are not yet acquainted with that ineffable communion and have not experienced the power and peace that there is in sanctification. To sum it all up, we are not yet *a chosen people* (1 Pet. 2:9) for we are still *serpents, a generation of vipers* (Mt. 23:33)."

"How can we be anything but serpents, we who are not found in obedience to God, but in the disobedience which came by the serpent? I do not know how to bewail the calamity as it deserves. How to cry aloud and weep to Him that is able to expel the error lodged within me, I do not know. *How shall I sing the Lord's song in a strange land?* (Ps. 136:4). How shall I lament for Jerusalem? How shall I flee from the grievous bondage of the Pharaoh? How am I to abandon the foul place of sojourn? How can I deny the bitter tyranny? How can I get out of the land of Egypt? How can I cross the Red Sea? How can I pass the great wilderness? How can I escape perishing from the bite of serpents? How can I conquer the aliens? How shall I utterly destroy the heathen within me? How shall I receive the oracles of the Law of God upon these tablets of mine? How shall I see the true pillar of light and the cloud proceeding from the Holy Spirit? How shall I enjoy the manna of eternal delight? How shall I drink the water from the life-giving rock? How am I to pass over Jordan, entering into the good land of promise? How am I to see the Captain of the Lord's host, Whom

Joshua the son of Nun, when he saw Him, immediately fell down and worshipped?

"Unless I go through all this and destroy the heathen within me, I cannot go into the sanctuary of God and rest, nor become a partaker of the glory of the King."[32]

St. Cyril of Alexandria notes the fact of the grumbling of the Israelites but adds that Christians, when they grumble, show apostasy from God and ingratitude because, while they have already tasted grace, they forget it. St. Cyril says:

"PALLADIOS: Those who have rejected the entire economy that we understand in Christ through sin will become food for the fire. And murmuring, as it seems, indicates apostasy and refusal to accept their salvation from Him, although they have tasted grace and have the experience of what has already passed as a sure pledge of what is to come.

CYRIL: Thus, I say. And after some lost heart, they too began the same outcry and sluggishly protested against God and Moses, calling the manna from heaven false bread. But they were destroyed by the serpents. For those who insult the Saviour and Redeemer of all with their ingratitude and do not at all take into account the grace of freedom, and besides this, they disgrace His life-giving Word and the gift of the Spirit as useless, will face the bites of the vile dragon. But whoever is not captured by such foolish faults will escape along with the wickedness and the punishment that accompanies it

and will prevail over their enemies, for it says: 'They will walk upon the asp and the viper, and they will tread upon lions and dragons' (Isaiah 5:20)." Therefore, as the very things confirm, it is harmful to those who are already trained and have not left their commendation through struggles to be idle and show a lack of courage, but rather, they have exercised themselves and become accustomed to sweat for virtue.

PALLADIOS: This is the conclusion, and it is true.

CYRIL: And our discourse assures us that not only is grumbling against God detestable and culpable, but making faint-heartedness a kind of accusation and outcry against the goodness of the Saviour is equally so, even if pains arise in between. And that the love of comfort is no less accursed, while it is within their power to enjoy the divine gifts in an untainted manner and to partake of the heavenly words coming through the Spirit, they throw themselves unbridled into perishable pleasures and the unclean love of the flesh. For it is a manifest insult to prefer earthly things to heavenly ones, even though they draw much loathing upon themselves... In such grievous offences, we will find the Israelites have been captivated. After that is, the condemnation for grumbling, they were immediately seized by the neighbouring and associated disease of desire along with all its most shameful vices."[33]

Theophanes Kerameus, delving into the reality of the crucified life of Christians in relation to our subject, says: "And indeed, the death that came from the snakes,

which is impiety, is abolished; however, the bites did not cease. For the desire that is in the flesh against the spirit has not been lost forever. For many times, even in the virtuous, the bites of desire are activated. However, he who looks to the lifted -snake- on the pole drives away passion, as if the fear of God is a remedy that disperses the poison. But to look towards the Cross is to make all his life dead to the world and crucified, and to remain motionless in going towards sin, piercing his flesh with divine fear (Ps119:120), as the Psalmist says. And the nail that immobilises the flesh is self-control."[34]

And the bee of modern times, Saint Nikodemos the Athonite, expressing the view of all the previous holy Fathers, advises us accordingly:

"Just as then the tangible snakes bit and poisoned the Jews, so now, Christian, the noetic snakes, namely the wicked demons, who never walk upright but always crawl on the ground and, in earthly matters, bite you, just like the tangible snake. And not only that, but the vile ones also strive to drag us to themselves. And what is the poison of these intangible snakes? It is sin and the passions. And how do they bite you? Through the assault of wicked, shameful, blasphemous thoughts, and generally, through anger and desire. When, therefore, brother, the demons bite you by assaulting you with some sin, immediately flee to the Cross of Christ, and seeing the Lord nailed to it, call upon Him with fervent faith for His help. And surely He will help you and not allow you to be slain by consent or by the act of that sin."[35]

In another passage, Saint Nikodemos ‘analyses’ the words of Saint Gregory of Nyssa, which refer to the topic as follows: “And Gregory of Nyssa (in the life of Moses) observed two things in the history... beneficial to your soul, dear reader. First, that seeing yourself on the Cross and in Christ, who was nailed to it, means that you must regard yourself as dead and crucified to the world and the things of the world and be unmoved towards every sin. And second, that the bites of the snakes are healed: That is your wicked death, even though you are a sinner, is not enacted when you look to and hope entirely in the Cross and the crucified Lord. And the snakes, that is, the wicked demons, or the desire of the flesh, which moves against the Spirit, I say, do not completely disappear, but remain even after the Cross of the Lord and after Baptism, for two reasons: First, for greater struggle and trial for you who are a Christian and to receive greater crowns. And secondly, knowing that your enemies are alive and fighting against you, you should not sleep nor be careless, but be awake and always be vigilant, fearing that suddenly the invisible snakes - demons, may bite you with the assaults of sin and that the innate desire of the flesh, unexpectedly, may rise up against your soul and push you into sin. In this, the foremost Peter commands us to be vigilant: ‘Be sober and watchful. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour” (1 Peter 5:8).[36]

Let us close the subject with an exhortation from the Patriarch of Constantinople, John Kalekas:

“Therefore, knowing these things, beloved, ‘let us

humble ourselves under the mighty hand of God'' (1 Peter 5:6), 'for whoever exalts himself will be humbled' (Luke 14:11), and those who are humble will be lifted up in glory by the Lord, and blessed is the man who has a high life and a humble mind. Let us not be proud, therefore, but let us humble ourselves. Let us follow Christ, our Lord and Redeemer and Saviour, lifting up His Cross upon our shoulders and mortifying the carnal movements and thoughts, so that we may also participate in His Death (Philip. 3:10), so that we may be able to say according to Divine Paul: 'Now we no longer live, but Christ lives in us' (Gal. 2:20), and 'as for us, we do not want any other reason for boasting except for the Cross of our Lord' (Gal. 6:14). Let us deny ourselves, and let us not prefer anything more than Christ, neither wealth, nor luxury, nor glory, nor bodily pleasure, nor this present life. But let us also despise this and willingly fulfil all the commandments of God. For we also have bitter persecutors, the visible and invisible enemies and foes, who tempt and disturb us every day, grieve and trouble us, and hinder us from applying both the commandments and the precepts of Christ. Therefore, let us not be weak, nor let us become dull and succumb to their struggles, but with courage and a manly spirit, let us stand against them and strive to achieve the endless glory and enjoyment of eternal goods near our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory and the power for endless ages. Amen."[37]

And after the closing, a prayer for all from Theodoret Cyrus:

"May we also escape the bites of the snakes! And

if we are bitten, let us turn our gaze to -Christ- who was lifted up for our sake -on the Cross- and draw salvation." Amen.[38]

NOTES

1. St. Nikodemos the Hagiorite, *Eortodromion*, Venice 1836, pp. 8-9.

2. PG 150, 257. (John Kalekas, Patriarch XIV of Constantinople, *On the Sunday Before the Exaltation of the Cross*).

3. PG 150, 260. (John Kalekas, Patriarch XIV of Constantinople, *On the Sunday Before the Exaltation of the Cross*).

4. St. Nikodemos the Hagiorite, *Eortodromion*, ibid. p. 9. Cf. "So much we have said of Christ; the greater part of what we might say shall be reverenced with silence. But that brazen serpent (Num. 21:9) was hung up as a remedy for the biting serpents, not as a type of Him that suffered for us, but as a contrast; and it saved those that looked upon it, not because they believed it to

live, but because it was killed, and killed with it the powers that were subject to it, being destroyed as it deserved. And what is the fitting epitaph for it from us? 'O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?' Thou art overthrown by the Cross; thou art slain by Him who is the Giver of life; thou art without breath, dead, without motion, even though thou keepest the form of a serpent lifted up on high on a pole" (St. Gregory the Theologian, *Second Paschal Oration*).

5. ΕΠΕ 5, 201. Saint Andrew of Crete uses almost the exact words regarding the type: "Therefore, that bronze serpent was lifted up, not as a prefiguration, or as a type of the Cross, but as an antitype of the type." (PG 97, 1010, *Sermon on Palm Sunday*). And Niketas Choniates: "And that serpent was an antitype of Christ." (PG 140, 120, *On the Religion of the Hagarenes*). Naturally, many other Fathers say this as well.

6. ΕΠΕ 13,155-157 (St. John Chrysostom, *Commentary on St. John the Apostle and Evangelist, Homilies 20-54*).

7. ΕΠΕ 13,157. Saint John Chrysostom's words are important: "Why did the Lord not clearly state that He was to be crucified, but referred His listeners to the old example? First, so that they may learn that the old connects with the new and are not foreign to each other, and secondly, so that you may know that He does not walk towards suffering without wanting to. And so that no one may object, how is it possible that after we believe in Christ who was crucified, we may be saved, especially since He Himself was snatched from death? He brings us to the old story. For if the Jews escaped death when they saw the bronze image of the serpent, it is just that those who believe in the Crucified will enjoy

a much greater benefit." And further: "Since He had said 'it is necessary for Him to be lifted up,' and with this He implied death, so that the listener would not be discouraged by these words, forming a human idea of Him, and imagining that death is the end of existence, pay attention to how He clarifies, making it clear that He who was given is the Son of God and that He is the beginning of life and indeed of eternal life. And it would not be possible for He who gives life to others through death to remain continuously in death. For if those who believe in the Crucified do not perish, much more will He who was crucified not perish. For he who frees others from loss is much more freed himself from it. He who provides life to others much more draws life for himself." (ΕΠΕ 13,155,159-161, St. John Chrysostom, *Commentary on St. John the Apostle and Evangelist, Homilies 20-54*).

8. Cf. P. N. Trembelas, Υπόμνημα εις τό κατά Ίωάννην Εϋαγγέλιον, Athens 1954, σελ. 115.

9. PG 61, 797. (St. John Chrysostom, *Against the Jews: on the bronze serpent; and to whom He granted a name above every name [Philipp. 2:9]; and since He had no one greater by whom to swear, He swore by Himself [Heb. 6:13]*).

10. PG 129,1169. (Monk Euthymios Zigabenos, *Commentary on the Holy Gospel of John*, tr. Nun Christina, Virgin Mary of Australia and Oceania, 2024).

11. P. N. Trembelas, *op. cit.,* p. 115.

12. PG 129,1169. (Monk Euthymios Zigabenos, *Commentary on the Holy Gospel of John*, tr. Nun Christina, Virgin Mary of Australia and Oceania, 2024).

13. P. N. Trembelas, *op. cit.,* p. 116.

14. PG 129,1172. (Monk Euthymios Zigabenos,

Commentary on the Holy Gospel of John, tr. Nun Christina, Virgin Mary of Australia and Oceania, 2024).

15. P. N. Trembelas, *op. cit.,* p. 116.

16. The translation of the excerpt: Numbers 21:4-9 is from Archimandrite Ieremias Fountas (now Metropolitan of Gortyn and Megalopolis) *NUMBERS, Text - Translation, Analysis - Comments*, Apostoliki Diakonia, Athens, 2006, σελ. 145-146.

17. ΕΠΕ 5, 405. (St. Cyril of Alexandria - *Glaphyra on the Pentateuch, Volume 2 Exodus Through Deuteronomy*, Glaphyra 12: Numbers, CUA Press, 2018).

18. ΝΘ, 1308.

19. ΝΘ, 1308.

20. P. N. Trembelas, *The Death of Aaron and Moses*... p. 125. See also: "But this is what happened to man in general, beloved. Forgetting the high purpose for which he was created and indulging in temporary goods as if they were eternal, he missed his destination and became enslaved to the desires of the flesh. And first of all, he disbelieved in the promises given to him by God, not wanting, like the faint-hearted Jewish people, to admit that his true goal is indeed heaven and the higher realms. Then the wretched one spoke against the Most High God and blasphemed the most revered Name instead of blessing it with humble kneeling. And after he finally loathed the inclination towards everything high and great and hated the transcendent ideas, with which the soul is nourished like with heavenly manna, he sought in the bestial and frantic intoxication of the senses new pleasures and new loves. But, my reader, what was the fruit of his apostasy? Like a treacherous and cunning snake, like a flexible and brazen snake, like

a variegated and colourful snake, like a dry and cold snake, sin rushed against the culprit, and pain, anguish, and humiliation scattered despair everywhere. The vile reptile left no quality, no ability of man untouched and untainted. Sin struck his body, turning it into a nest of diseases. It darkened his nous, shrouding it with malice. It crushed his will and left it in his hands shattered. It overturned his family life, transforming the woman, the foundation of the household, into a shapeless creature. It disturbed his civic life, stigmatising millions of human existences. It tarnished his religious life, forever cutting and diminishing the infinite God." (Presbyter Constantine Kallinikos, “The bronze serpent, or the mystery of divine redemption,”

Ecclesiastical Truth, 29 Μαρτίου 1902, σελ. 146-147).

21. ΝΘ, 1309.

22. PG 61, 796. (St. John Chrysostom, *Against the Jews: on the bronze serpent; and to whom He granted a name above every name [Philipp. 2:9]; and since He had no one greater by whom to swear, He swore by Himself [Heb. 6:13]*).

23. ΦΕΠΕ 7,189. (St. Makarios the Great, *The Fifty Spiritual Homilies*, SAGOM Press, AZ, 2020, p. 101)

24. See Stergiou Nikos Sakkou, *The Cross in the Holy Testament,* ed. "The Cross", Athens 1969, p. 78, note.

25. ΝΘ, 1309.

26. PG 56, 513. (St. John Chrysostom, *A discourse concerning the serpent that Moses crucified in the wilderness; and concerning the Divine Trinity*). And the holy Justin the Philosopher and Martyr says the following about the subject in a discussion with Jews

who disputed that Jesus is the Christ: “While you have from the signs that were made through Moses reasons to understand that He is -the Christ- you do not want to, but also considering that we might be irrational, you discuss what happens with you and are firm in words when you encounter a distinguished Christian. Truly, tell me, was He not God who commanded through Moses not to make ‘either an image, or a likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath’ (Ex. 20:4) and He who acted to have the bronze serpent made in the wilderness, through Moses, and set it up as a standard, by which those bitten by serpents were saved, and who is not the cause of injustice?”

“For, as I said before, He revealed through this mystery with which He proclaimed that the power of the serpent, which had acted to bring about the transgression from Adam, would be destroyed, and salvation would come to those who believe in Him who was to die for the bites of the serpent, that is, for the evil deeds, the idolatries, and other injustices.”

“For if things are not taken this way, tell me for what reason Moses set up the bronze serpent on a pole and commanded those who snakes bit to look at it, and they were healed, even though He was the one who ordered that no image be made at all?”

“And another of the companions - Jews - who came on the second day, said to Justin: ‘You have spoken well, we cannot give an account, for I have often asked the teachers about this, and no one has explained it to me. Therefore, you say what you say (for we notice that you reveal a mystery with which the teachings of the prophets are incorruptible).’

“And I said: ‘In the way that God commanded the

sign of the bronze serpent to be made, and it is innocent, so in the law a curse is established against the men who are crucified. However, there is no curse against Christ, God, because of the sign with which He saves all those who have acted worthy of a curse.'" (PG 6, 700-701, St. Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho;* ΕΠΕ 1,533-535, *Apology* I).

27. St. Nikodemos the Hagiorite, *Eortodromion*, ibid. p. 9. Note 1.

28. PG 6,417, ΕΠΕ 1,179. (St. Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho,* St. Justin Martyr, *The First Apology*).

29. PG 28, 72. (St. Athanasios the Great, *Testimonies from the Holy Scriptures* #47. "As all the prophets, gathered together, fulfilled the memory of the economy.")

30. PG 32, 965. (St. Basil the Great, *Letters,* 260:8). And John VI Kantakouzenos notes about the shape of the cross in the bronze serpent: "This also signifies this kind of miracle, that the upright wood which was planted in the ground and the serpent placed horizontally on it, represented the type of the cross. Therefore, the bronze serpent clearly indicates Christ. For just as that serpent had the shape of a serpent, but not the poison, so Christ was to become a man, but without sin. And each one who is bitten by the devil, seeing Christ and believing in Him will be saved, but whoever does not see Him, nor believes, will die from sin" (PG 154, 528, *Against the Mohammedens*, Apology III)

31. PG 5, 841 (*The Epistle of Ignatius to the Smyrnaeans*), ΕΠΕ 4,249.

32. ΦΕΠΕ 7,393-395. (St. Makarios the Great, *The*

Fifty Spiritual Homilies, SAGOM Press, AZ, 2020, p. 222-223)

33. PG 68, 583 (St. Cyril of Alexandria, *On the Adoration and Worship in Spirit and Truth*), ΕΠΕ 1, 351-353. "We must also pay attention to the very instructive things that St. Cyril says elsewhere: "There now follows a careful examination of what the text is about, and wherein the great and wise mystery lies, for it is not the literal sense that satisfies those who are more discerning but the mysteries that are found in the figures. So we shall now speak of the matter, transforming the narrative once again from the figure to its more general principle and to that which is the real truth.

The fact is that we are displeased with the good gifts that come from God above, and we seek heedlessly after pleasure to a degree that is not profitable. We set aside the exercise of virtue and incline ourselves rather to what is shameful. In doing this, we have grieved our Benefactor, and in more than one way, we have given offence to our Maker. Consequently, we have fallen prey to the bites of the snakes, spiritual snakes, that is, which strike us by means of every kind of sin, bringing us down into the bonds of death. And that rebellious serpent, Satan, leads a multitude of venomous beasts, as it were, and in the beginning, the first man, Adam, perished by his bites. And so evil, as though coming forth from a root, crept up on us also who have been born out of the root. Yet we have been saved in a particular manner, for we have beheld the serpent, which is Christ. So how is it that the God who is good by nature, or rather who is goodness itself, should be a serpent? It is because he became one of us, who are evil

by disposition, for he came "in the likeness of sinful flesh" (Rom 8:3) and "he was counted with the transgressors." (Is. 53:12).

And that we are evil—though we were not made so by God, but rather we fell headlong into this state of vileness because of sin's tyrannical dominion over us—Christ himself also makes clear when he says, "If you who are evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give good things to those who ask him?" (Mt. 7:11) Therefore, Christ, who had the likeness of evil, is a serpent because he became a man. But if one should view him from a spiritual perspective, he would be seen as one who is above corruption, surmounting death, considering its bite as nothing, and giving no thought to the strength of its venom. So we shall look upon Christ if we understand the mystery regarding him correctly. And we firmly believe that although he is God by nature, he became man, and yet while he came in the likeness of evil, his goodness was not in the least bit diminished. For he became one of us, not so that he might be seen as one who is evil along with us, but that he might make us good, transforming us by the Holy Spirit so that we might attain every form of virtue." (ΕΠΕ 5, 407-409; St. Cyril of Alexandria - *Glaphyra on the Pentateuch, Volume 2 Exodus Through Deuteronomy*, Glaphyra 12: Numbers, CUA Press, 2018, p. 207-208)

34. PG 140,177-180. (Niketas Choniates, *Synod of the Greek Church; Concerning the Dogma, "You who offer and are offered and receives," spoken of concerning King Lord Manuel Komnenos*. "From the synod read in the Great Church.")

35. St. Nikodemos the Hagiorite, *Eortodromion*, ibid. p. 8.

36. St. Nikodemos the Hagiorite, *Eortodromion*, ibid. pp. 9-10. The text of St. Gregory of Nyssa is as follows: "The foundation of what we believe about the mystery is the faith in the passion of Him who accepted the Passion for us (and the Passion is the Cross), so that whoever turns their gaze to Him, as the scripture tells us, will not be harmed by the poison of desire (Num. 21:9, John 3:15). To gaze upon the Cross means this: to make your entire life dead and crucified to the world (Gal. 6:14), truly immobile toward every sin, as the prophet says, fastening your very body with divine fear (Psalm 119:120). And the nail that fastens the flesh is self-control. Therefore, since the desire for sin brings forth deadly snakes from the ground (for every offspring of wicked desire is a snake), that is why the law shows us what appears on the wood. And this is the likeness of a snake and not a snake, as the great Paul says, 'similar to our sinful nature' (Rom. 8:3). The true snake is sin, and whoever commits sin takes on the nature of the snake. Therefore, a person is freed from sin by Him who took on the form of sin and who became like us, who have transformed into the likeness of the snake. With this, death is prevented from bites, yet the beasts themselves do not disappear, and by beasts, I mean desires. Those who gaze upon the Cross do not die the wicked death of the sinners; however, the desire according to the Spirit which dwells within the flesh (Gal. 5:16-17) has not been wholly lost. For it often provokes the bites of desire even in the faithful, but whoever gazes upon Him who was lifted upon the wood - the Cross - casts off the passion, dissolving the poison

with the fear of the commandment, as with a medicine" (ΕΠΕ 9, 309-311, *The Life of Moses*).

37. PG 150, 261. (John Kalekas, Patriarch XIV of Constantinople, *On the Sunday Before the Exaltation of the Cross*).

38. PG 81, 213. (Theodoret of Cyrus, *Commentary on the Song of Songs*)

ABBREVIATIONS

ΕΠΕ = Έλληνες Πατέρες τής Εκκλησίας, έκδ. Γρηγόριος ό Παλαμάς.

PG = Migne J., Patrologiae corsus completes, series Graeca.

ΦΕΠΕ = Φιλοκαλία, έκδόσεως ΕΠΕ.

ΝΘ = Νικηφόρου Θεοτόκου, Σειρά ενός... (βλέπε ΠΗΓΕΣ).

From the above Patristic editions and Sources, excerpts were drawn from the works of the following Holy Fathers and Ecclesiastical Authors:

Athanasius the Great, Andrew of Crete, Apollinarius of Laodicea, Basil the Great, Gregory the Theologian, Gregory of Nyssa, Euthymius of Zigabenos, Theodoret of Cyrus, Theophanes of Kerameus, Ignatius Theophoros, Justin the Philosopher and Martyr, John Kalekas, Patriarch of Constantinople, John Kantakouzenos, John Chrysostom, Cyril of Alexandria, Makarios of Egypt, Niketas Choniates, Nikodemos of Mount Athos and Severian of Gabala.

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Βενετία 1836.

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